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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000764

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT GRATEFUL FOR U.S. ASSISTANCE IN
HELICOPTER CRASH

REF: MANILA 753

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In the wake of a tragic April 7 helicopter crash that claimed the lives of eight civilian and military Malacanang Palace aides, the Ambassador represented the Mission at a highly emotional April 11 service for the victims. Clearly shaken by the calamity, an anguished President Arroyo offered heartfelt thanks for the instantaneous USG assistance that was put into effect as the tragedy unfolded. U.S. military assets including both helicopters and fixed-winged aircraft played a vital role as search and recovery efforts moved forward in the storm-wracked and remote mountain region where the helicopter disappeared, as an Embassy liaison team worked round the clock with Philippine counterparts at a Philippine Air Force crisis center to coordinate smooth bilateral interoperability. The crash has received widespread coverage in national media; many reports have highlighted key U.S. assistance. END SUMMARY.

An Emotional Farewell to Trusted Palace Aides

¶2. (C) The April 7 tragedy cost the lives of all eight persons aboard the helicopter belonging to the Presidential Airlift Wing (reftel), including key Malacanang officials with close ties to the President such as Presidential Appointments Secretary Marilou Frostrom, Senior Military Aide Brig. Gen. Carlos Clet, and Press Undersecretary Jose "Jocap" Capadocia, as well as the helicopter's three crew members. In a somber Malacanang Palace ceremony April 11 honoring victims of the crash, an emotional Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo thanked the Ambassador "from the bottom of my heart" for timely U.S. assistance in search and recovery efforts that ultimately helped locate the remote crash site in rugged, mountainous terrain in northern Luzon. Together with the usually more reserved and undemonstrative President Arroyo, normally taciturn cabinet members and other high-ranking government officials sobbed openly, and seemed stunned with grief at the scope of the Palace's loss.

Rapid, Robust U.S. Response to a Call for Help

¶3. (C) Soon after Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) personnel alerted their Embassy counterparts that the Palace's Bell 412 helicopter was missing, AFP Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Alexander Yano, Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap, and other high-ranking administration officials phoned the Ambassador, who immediately put into action an interagency crisis team that included all Mission military elements. An Embassy military liaison team was dispatched to the Philippine Air Force crisis command center, and worked with Philippine military colleagues on a 24-hour basis until all remains were located and recovered on April 9. PACOM acted

quickly and decisively to facilitate USG assistance by agreeing to the deployment of all U.S. military assets in country that might prove useful in search and rescue/recovery efforts.

14. (C) The U.S. made available a B-200 reconnaissance aircraft, a KC-130 from Clark airfield supporting the Southern Canopy exercise, plus two CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters present in the Philippines for the April 16-30 Balikatan annual exercise. The CH-46 helicopters arrived in Baguio at noon Wednesday, April 8, after which they conducted search and recovery support, as well as providing transportation for Philippine ground search personnel. The KC-130 overflowed the search and recovery area, providing coordination and deconfliction of incoming search information and communication relay for all the aircraft involved in the search effort. The KC-130's weather radar was also of great utility in providing up-to-date meteorological information to all helicopters; the unpredictable and often-violent weather of the mountainous Benguet-Ifugao area is thought to have contributed to the April 7 crash. On April 9 at the Philippine Presidential Summer Residence in Baguio, President Arroyo personally thanked the crews of U.S. helicopters for the vital role they had played in efforts to locate the downed craft and recover the remains of its passengers and crew.

Widespread Media Reaction to the Tragedy

15. (C) As details of the missing helicopter unfolded, the story drew widespread attention from print and broadcast

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media nationwide. Leading dailies The Philippine Star and Philippine Daily Inquirer featured large-print front-page accounts of the crash on April 9, together with pages-long supporting articles and sidebars outlining in greater detail the lives of the eight victims, and the longstanding dangers to aviation posed by northern Luzon's mountainous and stormy Cordillera. A number of articles alluded to USG assistance, and television reports included footage of U.S. helicopters operating out of Baguio's Loakan Airport during search and recovery operations. Notwithstanding attention focused on the failed ASEAN summit and other developing stories, media continue to follow the investigation into the crash. Embassy officers remain in close touch with Philippine counterparts as authorities continue to piece together the exact circumstances that led to the crash.

KENNEY